



ACOEM STATEMENT ON SYSTEMIC RACISM

Systemic racism exists within many aspects of daily life in the United States, including our workplaces. The American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (ACOEM) is a group of more than 4,000 physicians and other professionals concerned primarily with the health of American workers, their families, and our environment. ACOEM denounces racism and the accompanying hatred, violence, discrimination, and harassment that it engenders. Racism diminishes us all.

While police brutality has provoked the current public protests, racism has long contributed to poor outcomes for Black Americans in employment, housing, nutrition, exposure to violence, exposure to harmful pollutants, and access to health care.

Viewing the history of the United States through the lens of occupational medicine, we know that people of color are disproportionately employed in the most dangerous jobs with the fewest worker protections, leading to higher rates of injury, illness, and death. During the Great Depression, 76% of the Hawks Nest Tunnel workers near Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, who died of acute silicosis were Black. In the early to mid-20th century, 74% of coke oven workers (the most hazardous job in steel-making) were Black, and Black steel workers died of lung cancer at seven times the rate of White steel workers.¹ Similar occupational health disparities are still present. Compared to White workers, Black workers are more than 1.5 times as likely to work in high-risk jobs and over 2.5 times as likely to die at work from an assault or violent act.²

In 2018, Black unemployment was almost twice that of Whites.³ In 2017, Black and Hispanic people were more than twice as likely to be among the working poor, with Black women at the highest rate. In comparison to other industries, service occupations such as childcare, home care, housekeeping, food service, and health care, employed the highest rate of working poor.⁴ Even the workplace risks of COVID-19 are borne inequitably by people of color. Essential workers, disproportionately people of color, are at much higher risk of becoming ill and dying of COVID-19 infections.

Racism has significant public health consequences. Our responsibility as members of ACOEM is first to listen to and understand the needs of Black people and other people of color and then act to confront racism in our organization and our professional spheres of influence. ACOEM supports diversity, equity, and inclusion and condemns racism in any form.

Both within our organization and in the field of occupational and environmental medicine, we know we can do better. We will use our ACOEM Code of Ethics, which calls for us to avoid discrimination, as a starting point to examine how our practices align with our stated values. A deeper commitment will require us to confront racism throughout our profession by acknowledging systemic racism as a compounding factor in occupational and environmental medicine outcomes.

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ACOEM's members have expertise in pre-placement and return to work evaluations. Over the past 17 years ACOEM, has developed the *Guidance for the Medical Evaluation of Law Enforcement Officers*, which provides a pathway of best-practice decision-making for physicians who are evaluating persons applying to become officers.⁵ Through this document, ACOEM recommends that a post-offer psychological evaluation be performed by a qualified police psychologist following the psychological evaluation guidelines of the International Association of Chiefs of Police.⁶ When allowed by law, the results of the psychological evaluation should be shared with the police physician.

We encourage all municipalities and agencies to ensure that the health care professionals who are performing these evaluations are knowledgeable in the existing guidance and standards. This will aid in assuring that those officers chosen to enter service are, to the best available scientific knowledge, fit to perform all of their essential job tasks both from a physical and psychological perspective.

Additionally, we will facilitate conversations among our leadership and with our members to continue to work against racism. We will also seek outside support to identify more specific ways to move from words to action. This will require us to devote time, energy, and resources to the long and challenging road ahead. Like many other organizations, we recognize that we have much to learn. As members of ACOEM, we commit to shining a light on the many ways that systemic racism endangers the health of American workers, their families, and our environment.

References

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ABOUT ACOEM

The American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (ACOEM) is an international society of 4,000 occupational and environmental physicians and other health care professionals. The College provides leadership to promote optimal health and safety of workers, workplaces, and environments.